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UN at 40: redesigning a peace machine

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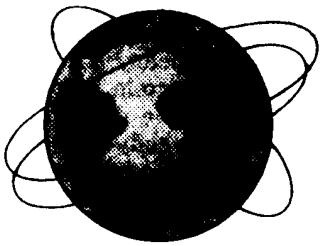
ADLAI Stevenson said that if the United Nations didn't exist, we would have to invent it. That's catchy. And probably true. But it mistates today's problem.

The UN already exists. But the world also needs to reinvent it. And it's much harder to recreate something that's already there.

Tomorrow marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of the UN in San Francisco. In a year devoted to massive remembrances of the end of World War II (with more to come in August for Hiroshima and VJ-Day), relatively little attention has been paid to the other half of what was accomplished by the victorious Allies in 1945.



Roosevelt, Churchill, Truman, and Eisenhower understood the interconnection of the three great events of 1945: (1) the end of the biggest, most devastating war in history, (2) the advent of the nuclear weapons age, and (3) the founding of the UN and its sister agencies to keep the peace.

But by the 1960s the assembly of nations was changing. It became more universal, less a power center for the big players on the scene. And as it changed, so did other parts of the equation.

First, the generation that created the UN and understood both its usefulness and its urgency gave way to a new generation. Dag Hammarskjöld, the second UN secretary-general, died in a mysterious plane crash. He seemed almost an Icarus figure, who had flown too close to the sun. The Congo peacekeeping operation he oversaw as his last duty was the most ambitious UN policing job and one which ended in tilting future UN administrations toward caution.

At the same time, the area of peace refereeing in which the UN had been in many ways most successful — the Mideast — underwent a metamorphosis of image from dove to albatross. Israel, whose founding the UN had midwifed and whose boundaries its international peace troops had patrolled, began to criticize the world body for anti-Israeli rhetoric. The United States, increasingly a mentor of Israel, found its attitude changing, first to apathy then to scolding.

The Vietnam war played a role in changing popular perceptions in the US. It pitted superpower interests directly against each other once more. This left formal UN peacekeeping efforts stymied. And the American public found it hard to understand this apparent inaction in the face of national anguish. The S-G's office on the 38th floor in New York worked on many Vietnam peace proposals. (As the S-G does today for Afghanistan, Cyprus, Cambodia, Iran-Iraq, and other conflicts.) But that action rarely hits the headlines or even the 27th minute of the nightly news.

In a way the US was spoiled. For the first 15 years, the UN was a relatively small but powerful club. Washington ran most of the show. Americans were proud of the fact that US ambassadors didn't even have to use their veto — as the Russians perpetually did and British and French occasionally did.

But tripled UN membership, an expanded Security Council, and gradual leveling of preeminent US power in the world both brought on American vetoes and lessened American interest.

Staffers at the United Nations Association of the USA (a citizen support group) are concerned about rising membership age and inability to attract young members. The same is true of other nations' groups.

In short, two generations after the first nuclear bombings and the founding of an apparatus to keep the peace, the new generation seems to have remembered the bomb and forgotten the peacekeeper.

Should anything be done about this? If so, what? The answer to the first question is an unequivocal

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'yes.' Since the Napoleonic Wars brought on the Congress of Vienna in 1815, we have repeatedly attempted to create a lasting peace mechanism for increasing portions of the globe. It's utterly wasteful to let each new league of nations wither through neglect within a generation or so of the devastation that caused its birth. Far better to amend and adapt to keep the conflict center useful.

The UN's pluses are many. It's a splendid finishing school for future foreign ministers and prime ministers. It provides a unique channel — even excuse — for quarreling powers to use in settling disputes.

President Kennedy understood that in ending the Cuban missile crisis. Henry Kissinger grasped the concept and capped many moves at the UN "for the good of the world." With its sister agencies, it helps make the world work in many ways we take for granted: weather networks, aviation rules, food and schooling for children in need, inspection against nuclear weapons spread, unsung peacekeeping in places like Cyprus, to mention a few examples.

But its liabilities must also be faced — especially since most of them are created by its members. To paraphrase Pogo, we have met the problem and it is us. Members need to take steps to modify the system of staffing by national quotas. That makes for an inefficient and oversized bureaucracy. Attention ought to be paid to eliminating overlapping jurisdictions. Some specialized agencies in the UN family have usurped jobs the parent is capable of doing itself. Budget priority ought to be given to improved satellite communications and computerization. The former, for gathering better UN intelligence on world trouble spots. The latter, for obtaining more accurate global statistics.

Above all, the major powers need to remember what Truman, Churchill, Eisenhower — and Stalin — understood so well: The world assembly and clearinghouse is theirs to use, not ignore. They can meet one another in its halls each fall. They can back mediation efforts for some of the 41 wars still going on in the world. They can make the Security Council peacekeeping machinery work more effectively — and try conflict prevention more early. They can set the tone for responsible speeches rather than the endless drone of self-justifying rhetoric. They can, in fact, turn the organization more toward quiet bargaining and less toward public posturing. And they can give its secretary-general more backing and hence greater public support.

Without such big power use, no routine salutes on this 40th birthday will give a new generation faith in the organization their parents so fervently believed would prevent World War III. That's something for Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev to ponder as they continue their homage to the end of World War II.

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